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CIA Bungles Aid to Afghan Rebels

Afghan freedom fighters used up their modest supply of U.S. Stinger anti-aircraft missiles more than three months ago and have received no replacements, despite reports to the contrary. This has seriously crippled their fight against the Soviet invaders of their country.

That's not all. The anti-Soviet mujaheddin were drastically shorted on the Stingers and launchers they got: 100 missiles instead of 150, and 28 launchers instead of 50. The Central Intelligence Agency simply didn't deliver what Congress apparently ordered it to.

The Stinger scandal is one of several indications that the CIA is botching—perhaps deliberately—its biggest covert assistance program since the Vietnam war. Sources within the agency claim that millions of dollars in Afghan military aid has been wasted or misused. Our investigation included a trip by Dale Van Atta to the Afghan-Pakistani border.

From sources in Washington and in Peshawar (the Pakistani city that is headquarters for most of the mujaheddin units), we learned that the CIA has bungled the supply line to a mind-boggling degree.

For years after the Soviet invasion in December 1979, Afghan guerrillas begged the United States for a weapon that could shoot down the Soviet warplanes and helicopter gunships that were devastating their fighting units and the villages that supported them.

The CIA grudgingly produced some Soviet SA7s, short-range surface-to-air missiles of dubious reliability. The agency compounded the ineffectiveness of the weapons by issuing precise, wrongheaded orders for their use: One or more

rebels hiding near Soviet-run airports are supposed to stand up and fire when a plane takes off.

The mujaheddin were dismayed at this tactic. Not only was it almost certainly suicidal, but it missed the point. The Afghans wanted the weapons to protect their supply convoys and friendly villages from Soviet strafing attacks.

But as one intelligence source put it, the CIA "had a box-score mentality, just like the body-count mentality in Vietnam." No airport attacks, no missiles.

When the Afghans complained that the SA7s were no good, their CIA suppliers disagreed, pointing out their devastating effect in Vietnam. The mujaheddin tried to explain the crucial terrain difference: In Vietnam, guerrillas could hide in heavily canopied jungles until American helicopters were practically overhead. They couldn't miss.

But in Afghanistan, guerrillas must take what cover they can in gullies on the barren hillsides some distance from their targets.

Congressional friends of the mujaheddin finally overcame resistance at the CIA and Pentagon and forced the shipment of Stingers in spring 1986.

For a while the mujaheddin used the Stingers with great effectiveness, achieving a 60 percent kill ratio. The Soviets changed their operations in eastern Afghanistan—and last December closed their airfield at Jalalabad, between Kabul and the Khyber Pass.

But in the first week of January, the supply of Stingers stopped—and the mujaheddin ran out of the missiles a week later. The Soviets quickly realized what had happened, and reopened the Jalalabad airfield.